DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 178 PS 010 959

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TITLE The Effect of Being Labelled as "Patient" on Subsequent Self-Control in Children.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (San Francisco, CA, March 15-18, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; *Behavior Development; *Delay of Gratification; Elementary School Students; *Females; Intermediate Grades; Kindergarten Children; *Labeling (of Persons); Primary Education; *Self Concept; Self Control; *Social Behavior

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effect of labeling a girl as "patient" on the girl's subsequent self-imposed delay of gratification. Subjects were 78 girls from 5 1/2 to 9 years of age. In a delay task, each child's possession of accumulating candy rewards was made contingent upon her stopping further accumulation. Labeled girls waited longer than did girls not given the task-relevant label. Further, for younger girls, those who took the test with a labeling adult present waited longer than those who took the test with a different adult present or those who took the test while alone. For older girls, those tested with a labeler present or with another adult present waited longer than did girls tested while alone. The results are interpreted in terms of modifications in the child's self-perceptions as a consequence of being labeled by an adult. (Author/RH)

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THE EFFECT OF BEING LABELLED AS "PATIENT" ON SUBSEQUENT SELF-CONTROL IN CHILDREN.

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PS 010959

Paper presented as part of symposium on "Cognition and Self-Control in Children" at Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, San Francisco, March, 1979.

Abstract

The effect of being labelled as "patient" on subsequent self-imposed delay of gratification in kindergarten, first- and second-grade girls was investigated. In a delay task, each child's possession of accumulating candy rewards was made contingent upon her stopping further accumulation. Labelled girls waited longer than did girls not given the task-relevant label. Further, for younger girls, those who took the test with a labelling adult present waited longer than those who took the test with a different adult present or those who took the test while alone. For older girls, those tested with a labeller present or with anotner adult present waited longer than did girls tested while alone. The results are interpreted in terms of modifications in the child's self-perceptions as a consequence of being labelled by an adult.

The development of the child's ability and/or willingness to display self-regulated behavior continues to be the focus of intense research activity. One form of self-control, the child's maintenance of self-imposed delay of gratification , has been an especially fruitful area of recent investigation as can be noted from the content of the papers in this symposium. Delay maintenance behavior has been found to be reliably influenced by manipulations of the assessment situation that are aimed directly at the child's cognitive activity. In the classic example, Mischel, Ebbesen and Zeiss (1972) found that children often sought to end a waiting period after a relatively short time when they were instructed to think about the delayed reward object while waiting. On the other hand, children instructed to focus their cognitions on something other than the delayed reward tended to wait longer before terminating the waiting period. Given the central role of cognitions in self-imposed delay maintenance behavior and given the great quantity of evidence demonstrating substantive change in the child's cognitive skills as he/she matures (including those discussed in the Mischel and Mischel paper (1979) in this symposium), it is perplexing that developmental research efforts are rare in this area. The present study will attempt to maintain a developmental orientation by considering age level of subject as a major variable.

The situational manipulation investigated in the present study is that of simple labelling -- i.e., the overt statement by one individual of the expectation he or she has regarding the level of performance to be demonstrated by the receiver of the message. The potency of the self-fulfilling prophecy has been amply noted in settings where an individual interacts with and evaluates the performance of another (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). The labeller often brings about compliance with the label by altering his/her interactions with the

labelled person. Teachers, for example, behave differently toward students they are led to believe will do well than toward students about whom they do not have such positive expectations (e.g.Meichenbaum, Bowers and Ross 1969; Rubovits & Maehr 1973). However, when the individual him/herself holds a label that concerns his/her own behavior, a self-expectation, the individual might then serve as his/her own prophet and modify his/her behavior to conform with this self-perception (Bem 1972). Indirect evidence which suggests that children can behave in accordance with the behavioral expectations arising from self-formulated labels is found in a variety of recent studies. Regarding task persistence, Masters and Santrock (1976) found that preschoolers who were instructed to periodically say that an effortful task in which they were engaged was "fun" or "easy" or that they were "really good at" the task would stay at that task longer than preschoolers saying that the task was not fun, was difficult, or that they were "no good at" the task. Lepper (1973) found that second grade children who complied with a prohibition about toy playing under mild threat were more resistant to deviation from a different prohibition three weeks later than children who had initially complied under higher threat. It was suggested that the "mild threat" children perceived (or labelled) themselves as effective resisters in tempting situations since they did not violate the prohibition when the situation did not coerce compliance. Subsequently, the behavioral expectation of this self perception influenced them in a second tempting situation. Children in the "high threat" condition appeared to have attributed their initial compliance, not to personal characteristics, but rather to extreme situational demand and therefore did not formulate a clear expectation for their behavior in the second tempting situation. Karoly and Briggs (1978) found that second grade children who were

given a general person-oriented, nonthreatening rule (i.e., it is "grown up" to wait) in an imposed delay situation subsequently demonstrated higher resistance to deviation in another situation than children who were not given such a rule. Finally, Fry (1977) found that prior reported expectancy for resistance to deviation by eight and nine year old children was predictive of their subsequent self-control. In all of these cases, the children's behavior was apparently determined, in part, by their own expectations about their level of performance. Further, in all of these cases, except the study by Fry, the children's expectations were based on how they actually behaved in an experimental task and only in the study by Masters and Santrock was the self-perception merely assigned to the child without a previously demonstrated behavioral anchor.

In the present study, an attempt was made to determine if the child's self-control behavior could be significantly influenced by prior exposure to a verbal statement of expected behavior (in the form of a general label of a task-relevant personality characteristic) administered by an adult with whom the child had had no previous interaction. The influence of this labelling might well depend on whether the child's post-label behavior is monitored. Lepper and Greene (1975) found that adult surveillance can affect interest in a task by a child. Therefore, the child's behavior under varying levels of surveillance was examined. It was expected that the influence of the label might weaken as the level of surveillance was reduced.

Seventy-eight white middle-class girls aged 5½ to 9 years served as subjects with each child tested individually. A 2(label or no label) x 3 (level of surveillance) x 2 (age level of child) design was employed with 13 girls in each of the six label x surveillance conditions.

Children who were in the labelled half of the sample were told by the adult experimenter at the end of their chat while walking from the classroom and just prior to their entry into the testing room, "I hear that you are very patient because you wait for nice things when you can't get them right away". The children in the "no label" condition were told, "I hear that you have some very nice friends here at school" to roughly equate the powerful influence that the affective tone of the experimenter's final remarks might well have on the children's performance (Masters & Santrock 1976).

For each subject, the experimenter seated her at a table upon which was a machine that, when operating, released M. & M. candies, one at a time, onto a slowly moving conveyor belt. The experimenter then told the child the rules for the "candy game". All of the candy that came out of the machine would belong to the child when she took it, she was told. She could take the first piece of candy or wait for more to come out. The candies would come out onto the conveyor belt, one each minute, until the child took the candy. Candy would be allowed to accumulate in a cup at the end of the conveyor belt for the child. When the child took the candy, either from the belt or from the cup, the machine would stop and no more candies would be forthcoming.

Regarding levels of surveillance, girls who were in the "labeller present" condition would then play the candy game while the experimenter, facing the machine, sat quietly behind them. Girls in the "stranger present" condition would play the game while an adult, who just entered the room and pretended not to know the departing experimenter, sat quietly behind them. Girls in the final surveillance condition played the candy game alone after the experimenter had departed.

These girls could signal an adult stranger to retrieve them from the testing room when they finished the game by pressing a button.

Subjects were classified as older or younger according to their relation to the median age of the sample (89 months). Half of the sample was tested by adult male experimenters and half by female adult experimenters.

The measure was the number of seconds that elapsed between the ejection of the first candy onto the conveyor belt and the taking of the accumulated candy by the child. Maximum delay maintenance was set at 900 seconds.

The results revealed no experimenter effects, main or interactive.

Three main effects were statistically significant. As can be noted on Slide I, children told before testing that they were patient ($\bar{X}$ = 491.8 seconds) waited longer than did children told they had nice friends ($\bar{X}$ = 234.3 seconds), F (1,54) = 13.32, $p < .001$. In Slide II it will be noted that children who took the test with the labelling experimenter watching ($\bar{X}$ = 472.4 seconds) or with the stranger watching ($\bar{X}$ = 437.1 seconds) waited longer than did children who took the test while alone ($\bar{X}$ = 179.7 seconds), F (2,54) = 6.83, $p < .01$. In Slide III it will be noted that older girls ($\bar{X}$ = 446.3 seconds) waited longer than did younger girls ($\bar{X}$ = 234.0 seconds), F (1,54) = 5.28, $p < .025$.

A significant interaction between age level of subject and level of surveillance (F (2,54) = 5.71, $p < .01$ is depicted on Slide IV. For younger girls, those who were tested with the labelling adult present ($\bar{X}$ = 438.4 seconds) waited longer than those who took the test with the stranger present ($\bar{X}$ = 191.8 seconds) or those who were tested while alone ($\bar{X}$ = 210.0 seconds). For the older girls, those who waited with the labeler ($\bar{X}$ = 512.0 seconds) or with the stranger ($\bar{X}$ = 682.4 seconds)

delayed longer than did girls tested while alone ($\bar{X}$ = 149.5 seconds). Older girls waited longer than younger girls in the stranger present condition, but not in the other two surveillance conditions. All comparisons were significant at the $p < .01$ level.

The potency of the "patient" label in facilitating self-control was thus evident for both age levels of children and under all three surveillance conditions. Even though the labelling statement was embedded in a longer informal discussion with the child, and was administered by an adult with whom the child had had no previous interaction, it seemed to provide information about which the child was particularly sensitive. Since two-thirds of the subjects were tested without the labelling adult being present, it seems likely that the child internalized an expectation of her delay behavior even though that expectation was not anchored on any previous performance. Merely providing the child with the label was apparently sufficient to make that child her own prophet.

The high degree of responsiveness by children of differing ages to the label supports a self-perception explanation of results of the studies by Masters and Santrock (1976), Lepper (1973), and Karoly and Briggs (1978). Other research findings may also be attributable to the self-perception explanation. For example, in a test of resistance to deviation, Toner, Moore and Ashley (1978) found that children who were given the responsibility to teach others the prohibition, but who were then prevented from doing so, were somewhat less likely to deviate from that prohibition in a subsequent test than were children not given the responsibility. It is quite possible that children given this prestigious responsibility experienced a change in their self-perception and a consequent change in their own expectation of their behavior in the tempting situation. 3

The influence of the label in a study in which the experimenters behaved identically toward all the children suggests that the self-fulfilling prophecy effect is not necessarily dependent on changes in the behavior of the "expector" in interaction with the person about whom the expectations are formed. Merely telling children that they are "late bloomers" (Meichenbaum, Bowers and Ross, 1969), or "gifted" (Rubovits and Maehr, 1973), for example, may be sufficient to alter their performance. The potency of the label across surveillance conditions further suggests that the effect goes far beyond supervised settings.

The interaction between age level of child and surveillance condition and the main effect for age level underscore the importance of a developmental approach to research in childhood self-control. The older girls demonstrated higher levels of delay maintenance under either kind of adult surveillance (relative to subjects tested alone) while younger girls demonstrated greater delay only when the more familiar labelling adult was present during the test. This finding suggests a more generalized reaction to adult authority figures in the older girls and deserves further investigation.

Finally, since telling children what they can do as well as what they should do had such a significant impact on the delay maintenance behavior of the children in the present study, it seems likely that the use of positive labels by socializing agents has a significant effect on other forms of childhood self-control. With the increasing interest in the powerful influence of "rational" nonpunitive disciplinary techniques on moral behavior in children (Cheyne 1972), positive labelling may emerge as another influential mechanism to increase resistance to deviation in children.

Thank you. You were very patient and have nice friends.

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